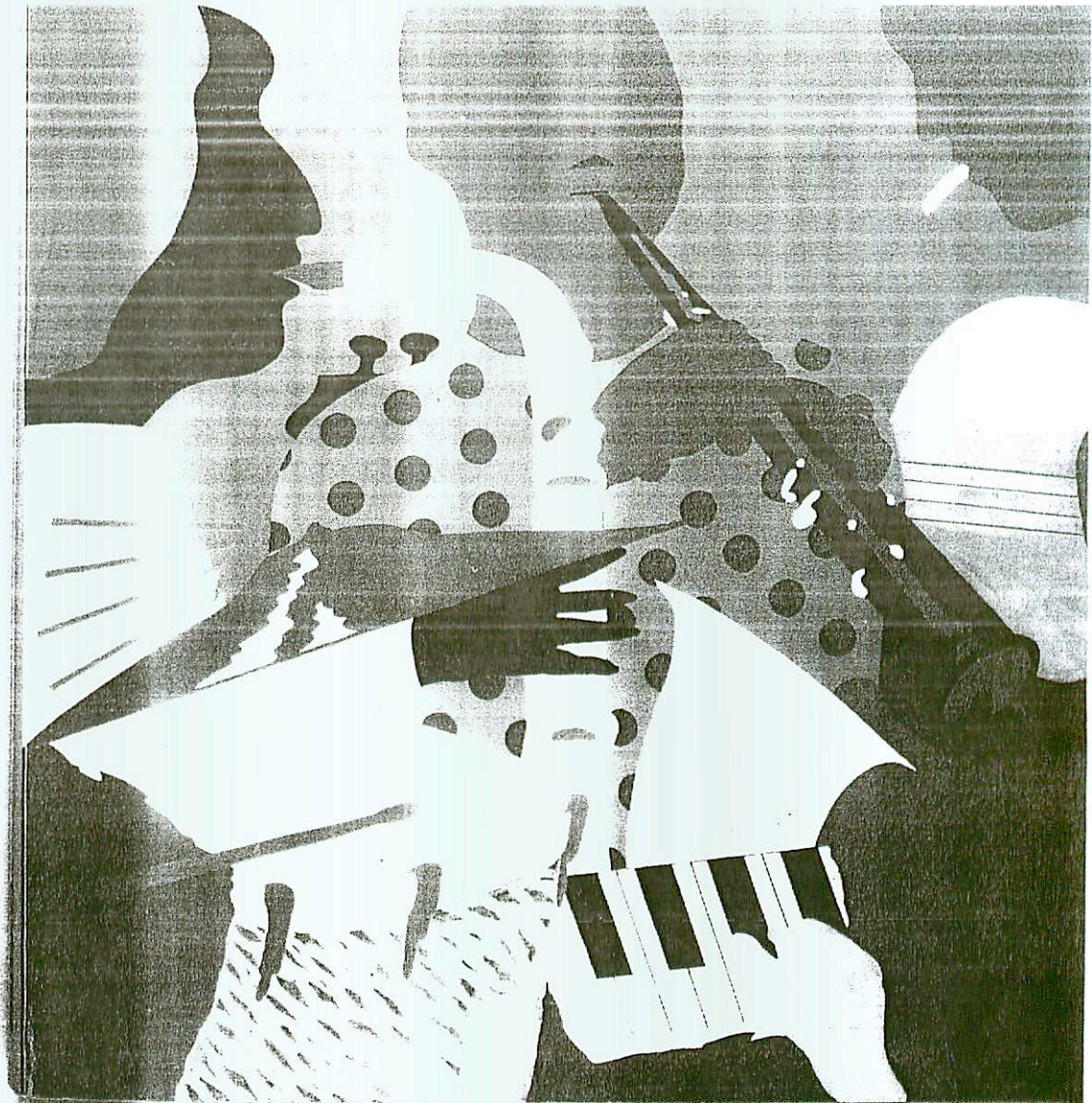


# Legitimate Peripheral Participation

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*It occurred to us at the same moment to dedicate this book to  
each other. We do so as a celebration of an extraordinarily  
happy collaboration, in which we experienced many of the things  
we were writing about.*



### *Series Foreword*

media systems, work-group collaboration tools, speech recognition and synthesis, image processing and animation, and software more generally.

These technologies are dramatically transforming the basic patterns of communication and knowledge interchange in societies, and automating the component processes of thinking and problem solving. In changing situations of knowledge acquisition and use, the new interactive technologies redefine – in ways yet to be determined – what it means to know and understand, and what it means to become “literate” or an “educated citizen.”

The series invites contributions that advance our understanding of these seminal issues.

*Roy Pea*

*John Seely Brown*

### **Foreword by William F. Hanks**

I first encountered these ideas in spring of 1990, when Jean Lave spoke at the Workshop on Linguistic Practice at the University of Chicago. There were about a dozen of us, mostly working on problems in language use and interaction; mostly anthropologists, linguists, or hybrids; several with research commitments to a non-Western language. I had just completed a study of reference as a social practice, in which I analyzed Yucatec Maya language use in its linguistic, indexical, and cultural contexts (1990). One of the central issues being pursued in the workshop was the relation between context and literal meaning or, in somewhat more technical terms, the role of indexicality in semantics. Coming from this angle, Lave and Wenger's work was really exciting because it located learning squarely in the processes of coparticipation, not in the heads of individuals. The analogy to language was just below the surface, only occasionally made explicit during several hours of very fruitful discussion, and yet many of us felt that we had gained new insights into problems of language. We had already been exploring speech as interaction, trying to take meaning production out of the heads of individual speakers and locate it in the fields of social interaction. The 1990 presentation, and Jean Lave's ability to engage intellectually in

the issues it raised, provoked some of the best discussion we have enjoyed. My first reason for mentioning this background, then, is to say that this book, on which the speech was based, is very productive in the sense of setting forth a strong, provocative position on issues that are of basic significance to practice theory quite generally, and not only to how practice grounds learning. The second reason is simply to underscore the fact that my remarks in this foreword come from a certain perspective, and are necessarily selective.

*Situated Learning* contributes to a growing body of research in human sciences that explores the situated character of human understanding and communication. It takes as its focus the relationship between learning and the social situations in which it occurs. Rather than defining it as the acquisition of propositional knowledge, Lave and Wenger situate learning in certain forms of social coparticipation. Rather than asking what kinds of cognitive processes and conceptual structures are involved, they ask what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place. This shift has interesting consequences, which relate the book to a broad set of interdisciplinary issues.

On the one hand, it implies a highly interactive and productive role for the skills that are acquired through the learning process. The individual learner is not gaining a discrete body of abstract knowledge which (s)he will then transport and reapply in later contexts. Instead, (s)he acquires the skill to perform by actually engaging in the process, under the attenuated conditions of *legitimate peripheral participation*. This central concept denotes the particular mode of engagement of a learner who participates in the actual practice of an expert, but only to a limited degree and with limited responsibility for the ultimate product as a whole. There is no necessary implication

that a learner acquires mental representations that remain fixed thereafter, nor that the "lesson" taught consists itself in a set of abstract representations. On the contrary, Lave and Wenger seem to challenge us to rethink what it means to learn, indeed to rethink what it means to understand. On this point their project joins a growing literature in cognitive studies, discourse analysis, and sociolinguistics, which treats verbal meaning as the product of speakers' interpretive activities, and not merely as the "content" of linguistic forms. The common element here is the premise that meaning, understanding, and learning are all defined relative to actional contexts, not to self-contained structures.

On the other hand, the shift also alters the locus of learning. In a classical intellectualist theory, it is the individual mind that acquires mastery over processes of reasoning and description, by internalizing and manipulating structures. Like thinking, learning so construed takes place in the individual. Two people may well learn the same thing, just as they may derive what is for all practical purposes the same understanding, yet this is a matter of coincidence, not collaborative production. The challenge of this book is surely deeper: Learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind. This means, among other things, that it is mediated by the differences of perspective among the coparticipants. It is the community, or at least those participating in the learning context, who "learn" under this definition. Learning is, as it were, distributed among coparticipants, not a one-person act. While the apprentice may be the one transformed most dramatically by increased participation in a productive process, it is the wider process that is the crucial locus and precondition for this transformation. How do the masters of apprentices themselves change through acting as colearners and,



therefore, how does the skill being mastered change in the process? The larger community of practitioners reproduces itself through the formation of apprentices, yet it would presumably be transformed as well. Legitimate peripheral participation does not explain these changes, but it has the virtue of making them all but inevitable. Even in cases where a fixed doctrine is transmitted, the ability of a community to reproduce itself through the training process derives not from the doctrine, but from the maintenance of certain modes of coparticipation in which it is embedded.

As a corollary of these shifts, the framework of this book implies a constitutive role in learning for improvisation, actual cases of interaction, and emergent processes which cannot be reduced to generalized structures. Here it joins developments in those social sciences where phenomenological, interactive, and "practice"-centered approaches have gained importance. One of the basic moves of such approaches has been to question the validity of descriptions of social behavior based on the enactment of prefabricated codes and structures. Instead, the focus on actors' productive contributions to social order has led naturally to a greater role for negotiation, strategy, and unpredictable aspects of action. This shift has far-reaching and as yet little-understood consequences for how one describes human thought, communication, and learning. The challenge, it would seem, is to rethink action in such a way that structure and process, mental representation and skillful execution, interpenetrate one another profoundly. It is important to see that Lave and Wenger reject both of the obvious extremes in responding to this challenge.

In a classical structural analysis, aspects of behavior are explained by, and serve as empirical evidence for, preexisting, "underlying" systems. It is these systems that provide the ob-

ject of which an analysis is a model. To the extent that actual processes are analyzed, they are "structuralized" – made to follow from, or instantiate, structures. The activity of understanding, in such a view, comes down to recognizing and implementing instances of structure, filling them in with an overlay of situational particulars, and relating them to a "context" (which is in turn structured). Insofar as "understanding" is something a person does in his or her head, it ultimately involves the mental representations of individuals. Understanding is seen to arise out of the mental operations of a subject on objective structures. Lave and Wenger reject this view of understanding insofar as they locate learning not in the acquisition of structure, but in the increased access of learners to participating roles in expert performances.

The other extreme position would be sheerly interactive, rejecting altogether the premise that structures may preform aspects of experience. Here, too, the position implicit in this book is nuanced. For Lave and Wenger do not reject the notion that participation frameworks are structured – it is precisely this that provides the conditions for legitimate peripheral participation – nor do they deny that expert performance is systematic. The hard question is *what kind of system, and what kind of structure?* It is not merely that the structural issue is transposed from the level of mental representations to that of participation frames. Rather, this transposition is compounded by a more subtle and potentially radical shift from *invariant* structures to ones that are less rigid and more deeply adaptive. One way of phrasing this is to say that structure is more the variable outcome of action than its invariant precondition. Preexisting structures may vaguely determine thought, learning, or action, but only in an underspecified, highly schematic way. And the structures may be significantly reconfigured in



the local context of action. Such a conception retains a constitutive role for the actual activities in which learners engage, while still avoiding the extreme position which denies any pre-fabricated content in what they learn.

Given this framework, learning could be viewed as a special *type* of social practice associated with the kind of participation frame designated *legitimate peripheral participation* (LPP). Under this reading, Lave and Wenger's proposal gives learning an actional ground, but retains its discreteness as a category of action. Alternatively, and clearly more in line with their goals, it can be viewed as a *feature* of practice, which might be present in all sorts of activities, not just in clear cases of training and apprenticeship. Think of all the everyday situations in which people coparticipate to a limited extent, thereby gaining access to modes of behavior not otherwise available to them, eventually developing skill adequate to certain kinds of performance. Participating members of religious congregations, athletes training together, the third string on a team, spectators at any public event, faculty and students in a university setting, new friends, the home *bricoleur* who helps a tradesperson repair his porch, nonmechanics when they describe the problems with their cars to mechanics, patients being treated by doctors – all of these interactions initially involve limited, highly asymmetric forms of coparticipation. All seem to have the potential to transform the participants, even if their trajectories and thresholds of change differ widely. In actual empirical studies of LPP, it will be important to consider critically the range of contexts it is meant to describe, from institutionally circumscribed training all the way to the learning immanent in everyday activities. At the latter extreme, both limited peripheral engagements and the potential for change would seem to be present whenever one party to an activity is more skilled

more skilled or expert (in some relevant way) than another. Such a liberal reading of the LPP concept runs the risk of erasing its specificity, but has the advantage of tying it into all kinds of practice. Furthermore, one could suggest that learning would be likely to take place whenever people interact under conditions of LPP. This would imply that certain participation frameworks may be “dispositionally adapted” to producing learning, even if the coparticipants are not attempting to acquire or inculcate identifiable skills. Language acquisition, where the learner is a legitimate peripheral participant interacting with masterful speakers, may well involve this. A child interacting with adults and an outsider habituating himself to local ways of speaking may be submitting to and ultimately reproducing community standards of which they never become aware. This kind of pervasive, low-level learning can be seen when speakers acquire regional accents or turns of phrase despite themselves, or when students come to reproduce aspects of the performance style of a charismatic teacher. Clearly, on such a general reading of learning, the trajectories followed by those who learn will be extremely diverse and may not be predictable. The challenge for a community that seeks to reproduce itself would be to regiment the interactions in which learning is likely to occur, as well as the outcomes to which it may lead.

It is clear that in many learning contexts, even quite narrowly defined, participants may disengage before attaining mastery over core skills. In such cases, they may leave the learning context with some but not all of the relevant skills, transporting what they have learned into another context. The question seems to be how one describes the detachability of these skills from the participatory contexts in which they were acquired. If both learning and the subject learned are embed-



ded in participation frameworks, then the portability of learned skills must rely on the commensurability of certain forms of participation. The employee who rises up through the ranks, performing a variety of tasks which she must later integrate as a manager, has in effect learned modes of acting and problem solving, not a system of rules or representations. Presumably, the success of a learner changing work contexts, and therefore integrating into new participation frameworks, would depend upon his or her ability to move between modes of coparticipation. This ability could be described in two quite different ways. One could assume that participation is schematized and that what is transported by the effective learner is an expanding repertoire of participation schemata. This reintroduces the notion of learning as structure acquisition. Alternatively, one could insist that participation is not schematized that way, and that what the effective learner learns is how to actually *do* practices. A schema cannot explain its own use, manipulation, or role in future improvisations. On this aspect, it seems necessary to posit that the skillful learner acquires something more like the ability to play various roles in various fields of participation. This would involve things other than schemata: ability to anticipate, a sense of what can feasibly occur within specified contexts, even if in a given case it does not occur. It involves a prereflective grasp of complex situations, which might be reported as a propositional description, but is not one itself. Mastery involves timing of actions relative to changing circumstances: the ability to improvise. By tying learning into participation, the notion of LPP leads us to think again about what it means for knowledge to be portable. Notice that the ability to engage in LPP, and the ability to learn, would presumably be acquired as well. The relative transparency of a learning context would depend not on features of the context

per se, but on the preparedness and flexibility of the learner. (This is not to deny that contexts may be relatively transparent or opaque in terms of the level of preparedness they require on the part of a learner.)

Taken in relation to a single craft that is taught through "hands-on" legitimate peripheral participation, the ability to learn would develop in close relation to the ability to perform tasks. On the other hand, a training program that consists of instructional settings separated from actual performance would tend to split the learner's ability to manage the learning situation apart from his ability to perform the skill. Given a sufficient disjunction between the skill being taught and the actual performance situation, one could imagine an actor who becomes expert as a learner – that is, who becomes a master at managing the learning situation – but who never actually learns the performance skills themselves. This possibility seems to be what periodic tests of performance are supposed to guard against. In an apprenticeship relation, where the learner is actually performing routinely, this kind of abstract exam is less relevant.

Insofar as learning really does consist in the development of portable interactive skills, it can take place even when coparticipants fail to share a common code. The apprentice's ability to understand the master's performance depends not on their possessing the same representation of it, or of the objects it entails, but rather on their engaging in the performance in congruent ways. Similarly, the master's effectiveness at producing learning is not dependent on her ability to inculcate the student with her own conceptual representations. Rather, it depends on her ability to manage effectively a division of participation that provides for growth on the part of the student. Again, it would be this common ability to coparticipate that



would provide the matrix for learning, not the commonality of symbolic or referential structures. (Of course the two may be interwoven in given cases, depending upon the nature of the skill.)

This last point raises a question about language in learning. In Chapter 4, Lave and Wenger rightly question the idea that verbal explanation is a uniquely effective mode of instruction, somehow superior to direct demonstration. Given the rest of their approach, the inverse claim would appear more natural. Quite simply, if learning is about increased access to performance, then the way to maximize learning is to perform, not to talk about it. The notion that demonstration is context specific and explanation context independent is based on an impoverished notion of both. A word of caution is merited here, lest Lave and Wenger's position be misunderstood, for this critique might appear to treat language as a code for *talking about* the world. As they recognize, a significant body of theory and research has shown that speech is equally a means of *acting in* the world. The point is germane, since language use entails multiple participatory skills, and is one of the most basic modes of access to interaction in social life. To equate discourse with reflections on action, instead of action itself, would be to fall prey to the very structural views that Lave and Wenger undermine in their approach to learning. Indeed, as they point out, the role of language in learning is likely to be highly differentiated, and a powerful source of evidence for the other ongoing modes of participation. At the least, the co-participants in communication among masters, learners, patients (etc.) provide part of the necessary background against which LPP must be defined. Once we see discourse production as a social and cultural practice, and not as a second-order representation of practice, it becomes clear that it must be con-

figured along with other kinds of work in the overall matrix of performance. It also becomes important to investigate retellings and discussions that take place between and around performance events, and between learners and their respective communities. Rather than slipping back into the structure-acquisition model, such an investigation of language would contribute to a more deeply historicized account of situated learning.

Attention to linguistic action may also help sort out a very tricky question regarding LPP, namely, whether it designates a kind of role configuration that actors may engage in or, rather, a way of engaging. Students of conversation have shown that a single party to an interaction may simultaneously fill several roles, and that, under proper circumstances, a single role can be occupied by more than one interactant. To the extent that LPP works at the level of how roles are occupied, we would be inclined to say that it is a way of engaging, not a structure in which engagement takes place. As such, it may be characterized by the partiality of the apprentice's contribution to the whole, or by the fact that the apprentice is simultaneously attending to the task at hand and to how the master performs in relation to it. In other words, LPP is not a simple participation structure in which an apprentice occupies a particular role at the edge of a larger process. It is rather an interactive process in which the apprentice engages by simultaneously performing in *several roles* – status subordinate, learning practitioner, sole responsible agent in minor parts of the performance, aspiring expert, and so forth – each implying a different sort of responsibility, a different set of role relations, and a different interactive involvement. One would expect that the role configurations in which LPP takes place would differ widely through time and space, and even over the course of a single appren-



## Foreword by William F. Hanks

ticeship, yet the interactive *prise de conscience*, the way the learner places himself in relation to the whole, would remain consistent. Under such a view, LPP is not a structure, no matter how subtly defined, but rather a way of acting in the world which takes place under widely varying conditions.

This last remark raises a final, still broader suggestion that is implicit in the book, namely, that learning is a way of being in the social world, not a way of coming to know about it. Learners, like observers more generally, are engaged both in the contexts of their learning and in the broader social world within which these contexts are produced. Without this engagement, there is no learning, and where the proper engagement is sustained, learning will occur. Just as making theory is a form of practice in the world, not a speculation at a remove from it, so too learning is a practice, or a family of them. This entailment of Lave and Wenger's provocative book brings it into line with important developments in a range of other human sciences.

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*Jean Lave*  
*Etienne Wenger*

## Legitimate Peripheral Participation



### *Legitimate Peripheral Participation*

Learning viewed as situated activity has as its central defining characteristic a process that we call *legitimate peripheral participation*. By this we mean to draw attention to the point that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community. "Legitimate peripheral participation" provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice. A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice. This social process includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills.

In order to explain our interest in the concept of legitimate peripheral participation, we will try to convey a sense of the perspectives that it opens and the kinds of questions that it raises. A good way to start is to outline the history of the concept as it has become increasingly central to our thinking about issues of learning. Our initial intention in writing what has gradually evolved into this book was to rescue the idea of *apprenticeship*. In 1988, notions about apprenticeship were flying around the halls of the Institute for Research on Learning, acting as a token of solidarity and as a focus for discussions on the nature of learning. We and our colleagues had begun to talk about learners as apprentices, about teachers and computers as masters, and about cognitive apprenticeship, apprenticeship learning, and even life as apprenticeship. It was evident that no one was certain what the term meant. Further-



more, it was understood to be a synonym for *situated learning*, about which we were equally uncertain. Resort to one did not clarify the other. Apprenticeship had become yet another panacea for a broad spectrum of learning-research problems, and it was in danger of becoming meaningless.

Other considerations motivated this work as well. Our own earlier work on craft apprenticeship in West Africa, on intelligent tutoring systems, and on the cultural transparency of technology seemed relevant and at the same time insufficient for the development of an adequate theory of learning, giving us an urgent sense that we needed such a theory. Indeed, our central ideas took shape as we came to see that the most interesting features both of apprenticeship and of "glass-box" approaches to the development and understanding of technology could be characterized – and analyzed – as legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice.

The notion that learning through apprenticeship was a matter of legitimate peripheral participation arose first in research on craft apprenticeship among Vai and Gola tailors in Liberia (Lave, in preparation). In that context it was simply an observation about the tailors' apprentices within an analysis addressing questions of how apprentices might engage in a common, structured pattern of learning experiences without being taught, examined, or reduced to mechanical copiers of everyday tailoring tasks, and of how they become, with remarkably few exceptions, skilled and respected master tailors. It was difficult, however, to separate the historically and culturally specific circumstances that made Vai and Gola apprenticeship both effective and benign as a form of education from the critique of schooling and school practices that this inevitably suggested, or from a more general theory of situated learning.

This added to the general confusion that encouraged us to undertake this project.

Over the past two years we have attempted to clarify the confusion. Two moments in that process were especially important. To begin with, the uses of "apprenticeship" in cognitive and educational research were largely metaphorical, even though apprenticeship as an actual educational form clearly had a long and varied train of historically and culturally specific realizations. We gradually became convinced that we needed to reexamine the relationship between the "apprenticeship" of speculation and historical forms of apprenticeship. This led us to insist on the distinction between our theoretical framework for analyzing educational forms and specific historical instances of apprenticeship. This in turn led us to explore learning as "situated learning."

Second, this conception of situated learning clearly was more encompassing in intent than conventional notions of "learning *in situ*" or "learning by doing" for which it was used as a rough equivalent. But, to articulate this intuition usefully, we needed a better characterization of "situatedness" as a theoretical perspective. The attempt to clarify the concept of situated learning led to critical concerns about the theory and to further revisions that resulted in the move to our present view that learning is an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice. We have tried to capture this new view under the rubric of legitimate peripheral participation.

Discussing each shift in turn may help to clarify our reasons for coming to characterize learning as legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice.



## FROM APPRENTICESHIP TO SITUATED LEARNING

Fashioning a firm distinction between historical forms of apprenticeship and situated learning as a historical-cultural theory required that we stop trying to use empirical cases of apprenticeship as a lens through which to view all forms of learning. On these grounds we started to reconsider the forms of apprenticeship with which we were most familiar as models of effective learning in the context of a broader theoretical goal. Nevertheless, specific cases of apprenticeship were of vital interest in the process of developing and exemplifying a theory of situated learning and we thus continued to use some of these studies as resources in working out our ideas. We might equally have turned to studies of socialization; children are, after all, quintessentially legitimate peripheral participants in adult social worlds. But various forms of apprenticeship seemed to capture very well our interest in learning in situated ways – in the transformative possibilities of being and becoming complex, full cultural-historical participants in the world – and it would be difficult to think of a more apt range of social practices for this purpose.

The distinction between historical cases of apprenticeship and a theory of situated learning was strengthened as we developed a more comprehensive view of different approaches to situatedness. Existing confusion over the meaning of situated learning and, more generally, situated activity resulted from differing interpretations of the concept. On some occasions “situated” seemed to mean merely that some of people’s thoughts and actions were located in space and time. On other occasions, it seemed to mean that thought and action were social only in the narrow sense that they involved other people, or that they were immediately dependent for meaning on

the social setting that occasioned them. These types of interpretations, akin to naive views of indexicality, usually took some activities to be situated and some not.

In the concept of situated activity we were developing, however, the situatedness of activity appeared to be anything but a simple empirical attribute of everyday activity or a corrective to conventional pessimism about informal, experience-based learning. Instead, it took on the proportions of a general theoretical perspective, the basis of claims about the relational character of knowledge and learning, about the negotiated character of meaning, and about the concerned (engaged, dilemma-driven) nature of learning activity for the people involved. That perspective meant that there is no activity that is not situated. It implied emphasis on comprehensive understanding involving the whole person rather than “receiving” a body of factual knowledge about the world; on activity in and with the world; and on the view that agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute each other.

We have discovered that this last conception of situated activity and situated learning, which has gradually emerged in our understanding, frequently generates resistance, for it seems to carry with it connotations of parochialism, particularity, and the limitations of a given time and task. This misinterpretation of situated learning requires comment. (Our own objections to theorizing in terms of situated learning are somewhat different. These will become clearer shortly.) The first point to consider is that even so-called general knowledge only has power in specific circumstances. Generality is often associated with abstract representations, with decontextualization. But abstract representations are meaningless unless they can be made specific to the situation at hand. Moreover, the formation or acquisition of an abstract principle is itself a specific event in

*Distinguishing*

*Claim: Abstract representations are meaningless unless they can be made specific to the situation at hand. Are these mathematicians?*



specific circumstances. Knowing a general rule by itself in no way assures that any generality it may carry is enabled in the specific circumstances in which it is relevant. In this sense, any "power of abstraction" is thoroughly situated, in the lives of persons and in the culture that makes it possible. On the other hand, the world carries its own structure so that specificity always implies generality (and in this sense generality is not to be assimilated to abstractness): That is why stories can be so powerful in conveying ideas, often more so than an articulation of the idea itself. What is called general knowledge is not privileged with respect to other "kinds" of knowledge. It too can be gained only in specific circumstances. And it too must be brought into play in specific circumstances. The generality of any form of knowledge always lies in the power to renegotiate the meaning of the past and future in constructing the meaning of present circumstances.

#### FROM SITUATED LEARNING TO LEGITIMATE PERIPHERAL PARTICIPATION

This brings us to the second shift in perspective that led us to explore learning as legitimate peripheral participation. The notion of situated learning now appears to be a transitory concept, a bridge, between a view according to which cognitive processes (and thus learning) are primary and a view according to which social practice is the primary, generative phenomenon, and learning is one of its characteristics. There is a significant contrast between a theory of learning in which practice (in a narrow, replicative sense) is subsumed within processes of learning and one in which learning is taken to be an integral

aspect of practice (in a historical, generative sense). In our view, learning is not merely situated in practice – as if it were some independently reifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world. The problem – and the central preoccupation of this monograph – is to translate this into a specific analytic approach to learning. Legitimate peripheral participation is proposed as a descriptor of engagement in social practice that entails learning as an integral constituent.

Before proceeding with a discussion of the analytic questions involved in a social practice theory of learning, we need to discuss our choices of terms and the issues that they reflect, in order to clarify our conception of legitimate peripheral participation. Its composite character, and the fact that it is not difficult to propose a contrary for each of its components, may be misleading. It seems all too natural to decompose it into a set of three contrasting pairs: legitimate versus illegitimate, peripheral versus central, participation versus nonparticipation. But we intend for the concept to be taken as a whole. Each of its aspects is indispensable in defining the others and cannot be considered in isolation. Its constituents contribute inseparable aspects whose combinations create a landscape – shapes, degrees, textures – of community membership.

Thus, in the terms proposed here there may very well be no such thing as an "illegitimate peripheral participant." The form that the legitimacy of participation takes is a defining characteristic of ways of belonging, and is therefore not only a crucial condition for learning, but a constitutive element of its content. Similarly, with regard to "peripherality" there may well be no such simple thing as "central participation" in a community of practice. Peripherality suggests that there are



multiple, varied, more- or less-engaged and -inclusive ways of being located in the fields of participation defined by a community. Peripheral participation is about being located in the social world. *Changing* locations and perspectives are part of actors' learning trajectories, developing identities, and forms of membership.

Furthermore, legitimate peripherality is a complex notion, implicated in social structures involving relations of power. As a place in which one moves toward more-intensive participation, peripherality is an empowering position. As a place in which one is kept from participating more fully – often legitimately, from the broader perspective of society at large – it is a disempowering position. Beyond that, legitimate peripherality can be a position at the articulation of related communities. In this sense, it can itself be a source of power or powerlessness, in affording or preventing articulation and interchange among communities of practice. The ambiguous potentialities of legitimate peripherality reflect the concept's pivotal role in providing access to a nexus of relations otherwise not perceived as connected.

Given the complex, differentiated nature of communities, it seems important not to reduce the end point of centripetal participation in a community of practice to a uniform or univocal "center," or to a linear notion of skill acquisition. There is no place in a community of practice designated "the periphery," and, most emphatically, it has no single core or center. *Central participation* would imply that there is a center (physical, political, or metaphorical) to a community with respect to an individual's "place" in it. Complete participation would suggest a closed domain of knowledge or collective practice for which there might be measurable degrees of "acquisition" by newcomers. We have chosen to call that to which peripheral

Complete vs. full participation

participation leads, full participation. Full participation is intended to do justice to the diversity of relations involved in varying forms of community membership.

Full participation, however, stands in contrast to only one aspect of the concept of peripherality as we see it: It places the emphasis on what partial participation is not, or not yet. In our usage, *peripherality* is also a *positive* term, whose most salient conceptual antonyms are *unrelatedness* or *irrelevance* to ongoing activity. The partial participation of newcomers is by no means "disconnected" from the practice of interest. Furthermore, it is also a dynamic concept. In this sense, peripherality, when it is enabled, suggests an opening, a way of gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement. The ambiguity inherent in peripheral participation must then be connected to issues of legitimacy, of the social organization of and control over resources, if it is to gain its full analytical potential.

#### AN ANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE ON LEARNING

With the first shift in the development of this project we have tried to establish that our historical-cultural theory of learning should not be merely an abstracted generalization of the concrete cases of apprenticeship – or any other educational form. Further, coming to see that a theory of situated activity challenges the very meaning of abstraction and/or generalization has led us to reject conventional readings of the generalizability and/or abstraction of "knowledge." Arguing in favor of a shift away from a theory of situated activity in which learning is reified as one kind of activity, and toward a theory of social

Rejecting "generalization"



practice in which learning is viewed as an aspect of all activity, has led us to consider how we are to think about our own practice. And this has revealed a dilemma: How can we purport to be working out a *theoretical conception* of learning without, in fact, engaging in just the project of abstraction rejected above?

There are several classical dualist oppositions that in many contexts are treated as synonymous, or nearly so: abstract-concrete; general-particular; theory about the world, and the world so described. Theory is assumed to be general and abstract, the world, concrete and particular. But in the Marxist historical tradition that underpins social practice theory these terms take on different relations with each other and different meanings. They do so as part of a general method of social analysis. This method does not deny that there is a concrete world, which is ordinarily perceived as some collection of particularities, just as it is possible to invent simple, thin, abstract theoretical propositions about it. But these two possibilities are not considered as the two poles of interest. Instead, both of them offer points of departure for starting to explore and produce an understanding of multiply determined, diversely unified – that is, complexly concrete – historical processes, of which particularities (including initial theories) are the result (Marx 1857; Hall 1973; Ilyenkov 1977). The theorist is trying to recapture those relations in an analytic way that turns the apparently “natural” categories and forms of social life into challenges to our understanding of how they are (historically and culturally) produced and reproduced. The goal, in Marx’s memorable phrase, is to “ascend (from both the particular and the abstract) to the concrete.”

It may now be clearer why it is not appropriate to treat legitimate peripheral participation as a mere distillation of ap-

prenticeship, an abstracting process of generalizing from examples of apprenticeship. (Indeed, turned onto apprenticeship, the concept should provide the same analytical leverage as it would for any other educational form.) Our theorizing about legitimate peripheral participation thus is not intended as abstraction, but as an attempt to explore its concrete relations. To think about a concept like legitimate peripheral participation in this way is to argue that its theoretical significance derives from the richness of its interconnections: in historical terms, through time and across cultures. It may convey better what we mean by a historically, culturally concrete “concept” to describe legitimate peripheral participation as an “analytical perspective.” We use these two terms interchangeably hereafter.

*Thesis*

#### WITH LEGITIMATE PERIPHERAL PARTICIPATION

We do not talk here about schools in any substantial way, nor explore what our work has to say about schooling. Steering clear of the problem of school learning for the present was a conscious decision, which was not always easy to adhere to as the issue kept creeping into our discussions. But, although we mention schooling at various points, we have refrained from any systematic treatment of the subject. It is worth outlining our reasons for this restraint, in part because this may help clarify further the theoretical status of the concept of legitimate peripheral participation.

First, as we began to focus on legitimate peripheral participation, we wanted above all to take a fresh look at learning. Issues of learning and schooling seemed to have become too



deeply interrelated in our culture in general, both for purposes of our own exploration and the exposition of our ideas. More importantly, the organization of schooling as an educational form is predicated on claims that knowledge can be decontextualized, and yet schools themselves as social institutions and as places of learning constitute very specific contexts. Thus, analysis of school learning as situated requires a multilayered view of how knowing and learning are part of social practice – a major project in its own right. Last, but not least, pervasive claims concerning the sources of the effectiveness of schooling (in teaching, in the specialization of schooling in changing persons, in the special modes of inculcation for which schools are known) stand in contradiction with the situated perspective we have adopted. All this has meant that our discussions of schooling were often contrastive, even oppositional. But we did not want to define our thinking and build our theory primarily by contrast to the claims of any educational form, including schooling. We wanted to develop a view of learning that would stand on its own, reserving the analysis of schooling and other specific educational forms for the future.

We should emphasize, therefore, that legitimate peripheral participation is not itself an educational form, much less a pedagogical strategy or a teaching technique. It is an analytical viewpoint on learning, a way of understanding learning. We hope to make clear as we proceed that learning through legitimate peripheral participation takes place no matter which educational form provides a context for learning, or whether there is any intentional educational form at all. Indeed, this viewpoint makes a fundamental distinction between learning and intentional instruction. Such decoupling does not deny that learning can take place where there is teaching, but does not

take intentional instruction to be in itself the source or cause of learning, and thus does not blunt the claim that what gets learned is problematic with respect to what is taught. Undoubtedly, the analytical perspective of legitimate peripheral participation could – we hope that it will – inform educational endeavors by shedding a new light on learning processes, and by drawing attention to key aspects of learning experience that may be overlooked. But this is very different from attributing a prescriptive value to the concept of legitimate peripheral participation and from proposing ways of “implementing” or “operationalizing” it for educational purposes.

Even though we decided to set aside issues of schooling in this initial stage of our work, we are persuaded that rethinking schooling from the perspective afforded by legitimate peripheral participation will turn out to be a fruitful exercise. Such an analysis would raise questions about the place of schooling in the community at large in terms of possibilities for developing identities of mastery. These include questions of the relation of school practices to those of the communities in which the knowledge that schools are meant to “impart” is located, as well as issues concerning relations between the world of schooling and the world of adults more generally. Such a study would also raise questions about the social organization of schools themselves into communities of practice, both official and interstitial, with varied forms of membership. We would predict that such an investigation would afford a better context for determining what students learn and what they do not, and what it comes to mean for them, than would a study of the curriculum or of instructional practices.

Thinking about schooling in terms of legitimate peripheral participation is only one of several directions that seem promising for pursuing the analysis of contemporary and other his-



torical forms of social practice in terms of legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice. There are central issues that are only touched upon in this monograph, and that need to be given more attention. The concept of "community of practice" is left largely as an intuitive notion, which serves a purpose here but which requires a more rigorous treatment. In particular, unequal relations of power must be included more systematically in our analysis. Hegemony over resources for learning and alienation from full participation are inherent in the shaping of the legitimacy and peripherality of participation in its historical realizations. It would be useful to understand better how these relations generate characteristically interstitial communities of practice and truncate possibilities for identities of mastery.

#### THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS MONOGRAPH

In this brief history we have tried to convey how and why the core concept of legitimate peripheral participation has taken on theoretical interest for us. In the next chapter we place this history in a broader theoretical context and investigate assumptions about learning; we contrast our own views to conventional views concerning internalization, the construction of identity, and the production of communities of practice. In Chapter 3, we present excerpts from five studies of apprenticeship, analyzing them as instances of learning through legitimate peripheral participation. These studies raise a series of issues: the relations between learning and pedagogy, the place of knowledge in practice, the importance of access to the learning potential of given settings, the uses of language in learning-in-

practice, and the way in which knowledge takes on value for the learner in the fashioning of identities of full participation. Our discussion of these issues provokes an examination of the fundamental contradictions embodied in relations of legitimate peripheral participation, and of how such contradictions are involved in generating change (Chapter 4). In conclusion, we emphasize the significance of shifting the analytic focus from the individual as learner to learning as participation in the social world, and from the concept of cognitive process to the more-encompassing view of social practice.